

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 210 938

FL 012 722

AUTHOR Coombs, Virginia M.
 TITLE Speech Act Theory and Foreign Language Learning.
 PUB DATE Nov 81
 NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (Denver, CO, November 23-26, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Communicative Competence (Languages); Grammar; *Pragmatics; *Second Language Learning; Suprasegmentals; Syntax; *Teaching Methods; Vocabulary Skills
 IDENTIFIERS *Speech Acts

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how an understanding of speech acts contributes to the communicative competence in foreign language learning. Reviewing John Searle's five categories of speech acts (1976), the directive is discussed in terms of its manifestations in various foreign languages. Examples of directives in English, German, French, and Spanish are contrasted. Teaching communicative competence presupposes for some the notion of grammatical competence. Both may be taught if teachers are sensitive to those areas of language use which require a knowledge of specific linguistic forms and an understanding of the situation appropriate for these forms. Language teachers should provide language exercises which actively require the students to consider both the grammatical forms and the contextual information necessary to produce a correct response. It may be advantageous to postpone such an integrating exercise until the individual grammatical concepts have been presented separately. Speech act theory provides insight into the function utterances have in a given language. While the theory is not language specific, lexical items and grammatical structures are. (Author/JK)

 * Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
 * from the original document. *

This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official NIE
position or policy.

Speech Act Theory and Foreign Language Learning

Virginia M. Coombs
Bucknell University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Virginia Coombs

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

In my presentation I want to demonstrate how an understanding of the theory of speech acts contributes to the communicative competence in foreign language learning. I will begin by sketching the parameters of the theory. In the next section I will discuss how specific examples demonstrate a particular type of speech act, and finally I shall present some ideas which apply this theory to foreign language learning in the classroom.

The production of a speech act or illocutionary act is a rule-governed behavior which must not only comply with the principles of syntactic arrangement, lexical choice, and the suprasegmental features of voice pitch, word stress, and intonation contour, but also with the pragmatic considerations of contextual situation and speaker intention. The focus of the speech act theory is, in fact, on the latter pragmatic considerations. The theory sees as necessary to the successful completion of an illocutionary act a definition of the roles of the participants, normally referred to as the speaker and the addressee or hearer, the presence of specific attitudes on the part of the speaker and the hearer with respect to the content of the utterance, and a set of conditions or a context in which the utterance takes place.

The speech act associated with a given sentence is assumed to be a function of the meaning of that sentence. That part of the meaning to which the speech act related is referred to as the "force" which the utterance has. For example, an utterance has a particular force when it conveys a promise which is distinct from the force of an utterance which conveys a request or a command. This notion of force can often be accounted for by overt signals such as word order, morphological form, (especially for verbs), or lexical choice. It is however more frequently the case that a particular force is associated with more than one syntactic arrangement, morphological form, or

lexical item. There is usually not a neat one-to-one correlation between sentence type and communicative function; the same can be said of morphological forms and lexical items.

In a 1976 article J.R. Searle, the leading proponent of the speech act theory in the US offers five categories of illocutionary acts. He makes the point, and it is one that we should keep in mind, that the criteria used and the resulting classifications of speech acts are not language specific. What is language specific are the lexical items and grammatical features used to perform illocutionary acts. The most important of the criteria used in determining the five categories include 1) the point or purpose of the utterance, 2) direction of fit between the words used and the world around us, that is, whether the words match the world or the world matches the words used, and 3) the speaker-expressed attitude towards the content of the utterance, also known in the theory as the sincerity condition. Other considerations include the relative status of the speaker and the hearer to each other with respect to the force of the utterance, the way in which the utterance relates to the interests of the speaker and/or the hearer, and the relation of the utterance to the rest of the discourse.

Briefly the five categories are: 1) representatives or those utterances which state a belief or commitment on the part of the speaker about the truth of the expressed proposition. Here the speaker's belief or commitment to the veracity or falseness of the statement marks the boundaries of a range of interpretations on a scale which runs from 'suggestion' to 'conclusion'. The second category of illocutionary acts are designated as commissives. Such utterances commit the speaker to some future course of action. The act of promising to do something is typical of this category. The expressives convey psychological states such as in the acts of thanking and apologizing. Declarations include those utterances whose purpose it is to appoint, to nominate, or

to declare. The successful completion of these illocutionary acts guarantees that the content of the utterance conforms to the world. A fifth category of speech act, and the one which concerns us here is the directive. This illocutionary act is defined as attempts in varying degrees on the part of the speaker to get the hearer to perform some act. These attempts may be considered modest, signaled by an invitation issued by the speaker, or they may be fierce signaled by a command. In the middle of this range fall requests of various kinds which are also attempts on the part of the speaker to get the addressee to do something.

It is the directive that I find appealing in terms of its manifestations in various foreign languages. With such a wide range of strenghts from 'invite' to 'command', it should be evident that we cannot expect a one-to-one correlation between the illocutionary purpose which is constant for all variations of directives and the overt grammatical signals such as word order and morphological shape. I have singled out these two features, because both are frequently assumed to be unique criteria for distinguishing the communicative function of an utterance.

Let us now turn to specific examples of directives in English, German, French and Spanish. I hope that in the discussion you will feel free to suggest other examples; mine are not exhaustive, but are intended to illustrate my point in the time allotted to me. My informants for the French and Spanish examples are linguist-colleagues of mine at Bucknell who teach both language skills courses and undergraduate level linguistics courses in their respective languages. The German examples come from my own research on the topic of the directive. My colleagues' immediate response when I presented them with the English sentences was "Do you want the formal or the familiar forms?" My reply was that since the three languages under discussion all employ the formal-familiar distinction, I would not consider differences in register

unless such differences were pertinent to the communicative function of the utterance.

The first example in all four languages illustrates the command force of a directive.

- 1 a) Shut the door!
- b) Machen Sie die Tür auf!
Mach' die Tür auf!
- c) Fermez la porte!
Ferme la porte!
- d) ¡Cierre la puerta!
¡Cierra la puerta!

The verb forms used in this function are interpreted as imperative, but are morphologically identical to verb forms used in other types of utterances. In English the verb shut is unmarked for its function, that is, the form functions as the infinitive, it also provides present indicative verb forms, the simple past indicative, and serves as the past participle. Such a wide range of functions is not typical for all English verbs. Generally speaking the imperative overlaps only with the infinitive and the present indicative forms. In German the formal register imperative form overlaps with the infinitive and certain present indicative plural verb forms. The familiar register singular form is considered unique; in strong verbs it will show the same stem vowel changes as the singular present indicative forms, but it adds no inflectional ending. For the weak verbs the familiar imperative singular form is identical to the infinitive stem. The plural familiar form for all German verbs is identical to the present indicative familiar plural form for all verbs, weak and strong. In French the imperative verb forms are identical with the present indicative forms for both the formal and the familiar registers. Affirmative Spanish imperative forms overlap morphologically with both present indicative and present subjunctive forms.

Examples 2 and 3 illustrate the possibilities for varying the force of the directive and are referred to as requests or polite requests. The characteristic syntax is that of an interrogative with verb forms in initial position. The French examples would seem to contradict this statement, but for those of you who know French, you will recognize the possibility of an inverted word order. My informant, who has done considerable field work among native French speakers, assures me that the verb-second or declarative syntax is more prevalent in the spoken language.

- 2 a) Will you shut the door?
- b) Wollen Sie die Tür zumachen?
Willst du die Tür zumachen?
- c) Vous voulez fermer la porte?
Tu veux fermer la porte?
- d) ¿Quiere usted cerrar la puerta?
¿Quieres cerrar la puerta?

In German, French, and Spanish the request of the type in the examples under 2 is formulated with the verb meaning 'to want to'. The English verb form is ambiguous in the sense that the form will can indicate desire that some act be performed or it can indicate the future orientation of a particular action with no request being made of the addressee that he or she perform a particular act according to the wishes of the speaker. It is the former sense which corresponds to the German, French and Spanish examples and which indicates a request.

The type of request illustrated by the examples in 3 is considered to be one of the most deferential and most tactful ways of issuing a directive.

- 3 a) Would you shut the door?
- b) Würden Sie die Tür zumachen?
- c) Vous voulez bien fermer la porte?
Tu veux bien fermer la porte?

- d) Tenga usted la bondad de cerrar la puerta.
Ten la bondad de cerrar la puerta.

¿Tendría usted la bondad de cerrar la puerta?
 ¿Tendrías la bondad de cerrar la puerta?

English and German use the interrogative syntax, while French and Spanish use declarative syntactic pattern. There is the possibility of expressing this type of request in Spanish with an interrogative structure as well. An example is also given following 3d. Notice that in the French example the difference between 2 and 3 is the presence of bien in 3. The verb form in both cases is present indicative. The verb forms in the English, German, and Spanish examples are not indicative forms; English and German use subjunctive form would and würden respectively while Spanish used a true second person singular imperative form in the familiar and a subjunctive form in the formal register. The alternate example in Spanish in 3 employs a conditional verb form.

The fourth example is offered for comparative purposes because of its syntactic structure.

- 4 a) Is he coming here?
 b) Kommt er hierher?
 c) Il vient ici?
 d) ¿Viene aquí?

Here the interrogative syntax does not convey a request to perform a particular act, but is a request for an affirmative or a negative reply. I have included it so that we may see that an interrogative syntactic framework has multiple functions. It does not always convey a general question, but can be used to issue a directive which has as its purpose that the addressee perform some specific action.

In discussing these examples I've made no mention of the role which intonation plays in oral language. It plays an extremely important role where there are no overt signals by way of word choice or syntactic pattern. The voice must in these instances carry the burden of indicating the purpose of the utterance.

Let us now turn to the application of speech act theory to foreign language teaching and learning. As teachers we want our students to achieve a certain level of communicative competence in the target language. Teaching this communicative competence presupposes for some the notion of grammatical competence. I believe that we can teach both to our students if we are sensitive to those areas of language use which require a knowledge of specific linguistic forms and an understanding of the situation appropriate for these forms. As teachers you look over the examples in the language which you teach and your response is "Yes, of course. That's obvious!" But how obvious are these forms of requests to the language learner? Can the student arrange these utterances according to the situations in which they occur?

When we teach the fundamentals of grammar we isolate forms and syntactic patterns and drill these, usually devoid of a particular context in order to achieve some mastery of these forms and patterns. Oral substitution drills are a common enough classroom exercise. So, for example, in German there are three imperative forms which students must learn. The subjunctive mood of the verb sometimes seems to be an insurmountable task for both teacher and student. Is there any time left for presenting a sequence of directives such as 1 to 3 and discussing and practicing them in appropriate contexts? Another example of grammatical mastery related to the examples present here is the way in which we usually introduce interrogative syntax. It is presented in the context of utterances such as 4, but is rarely mentioned in connection with requests such as 2 and 3. Occasionally we will find a footnote or casual

reference at the end of the subjunctive chapter which points out that this verb form may be used to express a polite request such as 3, but no specific reference to the interrogative syntax is made.

It is our responsibility as teachers to make good use of this foot-noted material and provide language exercises which actively require the students to consider both the grammatical forms and the contextual information necessary to produce a correct response. It may be advantageous to postpone such an integrating exercise until the individual grammatical concepts have been presented separately. But such exercises are vital and do belong to the business of teaching communicative competence.

As I stated at the beginning of my remarks, the theory of speech acts can be used to provide insight into the function which utterances have in a given language. The theory is not language specific, but the lexical items and the grammatical structures are. Within the system of a language certain lexical choices and grammatical constructions are used to perform particular illocutionary acts. Each of us must become aware of the relationships between forms and function and incorporate them into our teaching in order to help our students achieve communicative competence in the target language.

References

- Searle, John R. (1969). Speech Acts. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- _____. (1976). A classification of illocutionary acts. *Language in Society*. 5. 1-23.